

R 130902Z APR 95
FM AMEMBASSY KUALA LUMPUR
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 0919
INFO AMEMBASSY BANGKOK
AMEMBASSY MANILA
AMEMBASSY BANDAR SERI BEGAWAN
AMEMBASSY JAKARTA
AMEMBASSY SINGAPORE

C O N F I D E N T I A L KUALA LUMPUR 001919

EAP/PIMBS

E.O.12356: DECL: OADR
TAGS: PREL PGOV MY
SUBJECT: TIME UPSETS MAHATHIR

¶1. PRIME MINISTER MAHATHIR RESPONDED WITH ANTI-WEST RHETORIC TO AN ARTICLE IN THE APRIL 10 ISSUE OF TIME MAGAZINE WHICH ALLEGED THAT ABU SAYYAF, A SMALL MUSLIM EXTREMIST GROUP BASED IN THE SOUTHERN PHILIPPINES, WAS RECEIVING ARMS, MONEY AND TRAINING FROM ISLAMIC GROUPS IN VARIOUS COUNTRIES INCLUDING MALAYSIA. THE ARTICLE ALSO REPORTED THAT "THE GROUP USES TRAINING CAMPS IN MALAYSIA AND IS EXPECTING ARMS SHIPMENTS FROM SUPPORTERS THERE." THE PRIME MINISTER DESCRIBED THE PIECE AS A "PART OF A CAMPAIGN BY THE WESTERN MEDIA TO DISCREDIT MALAYSIA" TO "DETER PEOPLE FROM INVESTING AND VISITING HERE, GENERALLY AIMED AT UNDERMINING THE NATION'S ECONOMY AND ITS DEVELOPMENT." PEOPLE UNHAPPY WITH MALAYSIA'S "VOCIFEROUS" STAND ON INTERNATIONAL ISSUES, HE EXPLAINED, WERE BEHIND THE WESTERN MEDIA'S CONSPIRACY. HE ALSO CONFIDENTLY CHALLENGED TIME TO "COME TO MALAYSIA AND MAKE A REPORT HERE" THAT MALAYSIA IS TRAINING TERRORISTS. THE INFORMATION MINISTER ECHOED THE PM'S LINE. NO ONE FROM THE GOM HAS FORMALLY OR INFORMALLY COMPLAINED ABOUT THE ARTICLE TO US. SEVERAL OF OUR MALAYSIAN CONTACTS ARE CURIOUS ABOUT THE STORY -- THEY WANT TO KNOW IF IT'S TRUE.

¶2. COMMENT: MAHATHIR WAS STILL ANXIOUS ABOUT THE NEGATIVE IMPACT OF A RECENT FORTUNE ARTICLE WHICH DESCRIBED THE MALAYSIAN CURRENCY AS AT RISK POST-MEXICO, WHEN THE TIME PIECE CAME OUT. HE ORDERED A DELAY IN THE DISTRIBUTION OF THE TIME ISSUE BUT DID NOT BAN IT. (OBSERVERS EXPECT THE MAGAZINE WILL BE ALLOWED ON THE SHELVES IN A COUPLE OF WEEKS.) WITH THE GENERAL ELECTION JUST AROUND THE CORNER, HIS RHETORIC WAS VERY MUCH EXPECTED SINCE CONSPIRACY THEORIES STILL HAVE A FOLLOWING HERE. HOWEVER, AS COMPARED TO HIS PREVIOUS BOUTS WITH WESTERN MEDIA (MOST NOTABLY, DENYING CONTRACTS TO BRITISH FIRMS IN RESPONSE TO AN UNFLATTERING ARTICLE IN THE BRITISH PRESS), THE PM'S REACTION TO FORTUNE AND NOW TIME PIECES HAS BEEN MODERATE AND APPARENTLY SHORT LIVED. THERE MAY BE SEVERAL REASONS FOR THIS. DIFFERENT FROM PREVIOUS CASES, MAHATHIR WAS NOT PERSONALLY MENTIONED IN THE STORIES. FURTHER, THE LAST TWO ANTI-BRITISH AND ANTI-AUSTRALIAN OUTINGS HAVE NOT BEEN VIEWED AS CLEAR-CUT VICTORIES FOR THE PM. FINALLY, GIVEN THE MURKY GENERAL HISTORY OF MORO-MALAYSIAN DEALINGS, HE MAY FEEL IT BEST NOT TO GO INTO TOO MANY DETAILS. THE FACT THAT WE HAVE RECEIVED ALMOST NO QUERIES FROM THE PRESS IS FURTHER INDICATION THAT THE GOVERNMENT DOES NOT WISH TO MAKE AN ISSUE OF THIS AT THIS TIME.

CHAMBERLIN